

Late, sure, but Chicago thinks big - Millennium Park opens, finally, with weekend bash starting today

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Author: KEVIN NANCE

Let no one say that Chicago does anything halfway. For evidence to the contrary, look no further than Millennium Park, the \$475 million downtown showcase boasting work by some of the world's most prestigious artists and architects, finally opening with a three-day, \$700,000 bash starting today.

Sure, it's four years late and \$325 million more expensive than originally planned, but the 24.5-acre park -- with its exuberant centerpiece, architect Frank Gehry's Pritzker Pavilion -- is a brash and brawny testament to Chicago's vision of itself as a world-class city.

Lois Weisberg, Chicago's commissioner of cultural affairs, compares the Millennium Park project to the city's effort in 1893, when it hosted the World's Columbian Exposition, which drew an astonishing 27 million visitors. "That attitude of those people of a century ago is exactly the same as Mayor Daley and the people who created Millennium Park," Weisberg says. "They know that in Chicago, you do things big."

And just as in 1893, tourists are expected to flock to see the City of Big Shoulders thinking big.

"There's no question about it," says park chairman John Bryan. "Remember, 600,000 people went to Bilbao, Spain, to see Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in its first year, and now we've got a new Gehry masterpiece. We've got pieces by world-class artists Anish Kapoor and Jaume Plensa. And we've got the Lurie Garden, which is going to appeal to a whole new generation of garden enthusiasts. People all over the world are going to be saying: 'You must go and see this.'"

That includes people right here in Chicago. Thousands are expected to turn out for the weekend's festivities, including tonight's opening concert by the Grant Park Orchestra at the Pritzker, and for park tours, which start every 30 minutes. Highlights:

Today

* 5-7:30 p.m.: Performances throughout the park by music and dance groups, drummers, clowns and puppeteers.

* 7:30-10 p.m.: The unveiling of the Pritzker, with a performance by the Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus. On the program are works by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Copland and John Corigliano (whose "Midsummer Fanfare," commissioned for the occasion, will have its premiere).

* Redmoon Theater will light up the park with a roving installation of lanterns and fire.

* 10:30 p.m.-midnight: More performances on the Harris Theater rooftop terrace, featuring the Fulcrum Point New Music Project and Fareed Haque and the Indo-Pak Jazz Coalition. There'll also be dancing on the Bank One Promenade with disc jockeys Steve "Silk" Hurley and Derrick Carter.

Saturday

* 6:30-10 a.m. A sunrise workout on the Great Lawn, with drumming followed by fitness instruction in yoga and Tai Chi.

- * 10 a.m.-12:30 p.m.: The Grant Park Orchestra conducts an open rehearsal at the Pritzker.
- * 12:30-3:30 p.m.: "Chicago on Parade," with more than 20 music and dance companies making a grand entrance before performing on stages throughout the park.
- * 3:30-6:30 p.m.: "Reflecting Chicago," a concert at the Pritzker featuring the diversity of the local music scene from Robbie Fulks to Koko Taylor.
- * 3:30-7:30 p.m.: "Pathway Performances," ranging from flamenco guitar and accordion music to Russian folk singing and stilt-walking.
- * 7:30-9:30 p.m.: The Grant Park Orchestra with mezzo-soprano Jennifer Larmore.
- * 10 p.m.-midnight: Performances continue into the night at the Harris' rooftop terrace, with Eighth Blackbird, Ira Glass of "This American Life," Chris Ware and the pop duo the Aluminum Group. Also: dancing with Angel Melendez & the 911 Mambo Orchestra on the Bank One Promenade.

Sunday

- * 10 a.m.-12:30 p.m.: "Wait, Wait ... Don't Tell Me," a live taping of the public radio news quiz featuring author Roy Blount Jr., Air America host Sue Ellicott and writer-performer Adam Felber.
- * Noon-3 p.m.: A three-ring circus on the Bank One Promenade will feature the Bumblinni Brothers, Chicago Youth Circus and the Actors Gymnasium.
- * Noon-3:30 p.m.: Performances on the North Balcony by singers from the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists, soprano Kim Jones and tenor Cornelius Johnson, as well as highlights of the Chicago Cultural Center's summer opera program and the Gallery 37 Operatics Vocal Ensemble. At the Wrigley Square Peristyle, there'll be music for kids, featuring Ella Jenkins, Ralph's World and the Near North Montessori School's kid rock band, the Blisters.
- * 3-3:25 p.m.: The Chicago Children's Choir performs at the Pritzker, followed by the Chicago Immigrant Orchestra, featuring 22 musicians representing Chicago's ethnic communities.
- * 5-6:30 p.m.: An improvisational jazz performance by Crepuscule.
- * 6:30-8:30 p.m.: The Grant Park Orchestra at the Pritzker.

Caption: Chicago's \$475 million Millennium Park opens today with a weekendlong celebration, including tonight's opening concert at the Pritzker Pavilion. Jim Frost

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